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SUBJECT: Sunday's Chilean Presidential Election: Pinera Appears
Poised to Win, though Lead May be Shrinking

REF: A) 09 SANTIAGO 755; B) 09 SANTIAGO 899; C) 09 SANTIAGO 1208
D) 09 SANTIAGO 947; E) SANTIAGO 7

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Opposition candidate Sebastian Pinera leads government candidate Eduardo Frei by 2-6 points just days before the January 17 presidential runoff election. Although the most recent (and only nationwide) poll shows the two in a statistical dead heat, Pinera and his campaign exude confidence while the Frei campaign is looking anxious. End Summary.

Polls Shows Pinera In the Lead, But is Frei Closing the Gap?

¶2. (U) Polls released since the first round presidential election, held on December 13, have consistently shown Pinera ahead, although the most recent--and only nationwide--poll suggests that Frei has cut that lead to within striking distance. Just days before the presidential run-off scheduled for January 17, a poll released January 13 shows conservative opposition candidate Sebastian Pinera (Ref A) ahead of governing Concertacion coalition candidate Eduardo Frei (Ref B) by less than 2 points. The difference is well within the 3 point margin of error of the nation-wide poll. Issued by left-leaning pollster Marta Lagos' firm MORI, the poll includes rural voters, who tend to favor Frei, and is based on face-to-face interviews, considered more reliable than telephone polling. However, other polls, conducted by different polling firms and released on December 18, December 19, and January 10, all showed Pinera with a sizeable 5 to 6 point lead. These earlier polls were conducted only in major cities and were done by phone--both measures which tend to favor Pinera.

¶3. (U) The MORI poll shows that Frei has managed to substantially close the gap since his poor showing in the December 13 first-round elections, where he garnered only 29.6 percent to Pinera's 44 percent (Ref C). However, most observers -- and Pinera advisors -- believe that he has the votes to win (Ref D) even as this latest poll data shows the candidates heading into a statistical dead-heat. Other aspects of the poll point to a Pinera victory as well. When asked who they thought would win the January 17 election, 51 percent of voters said they thought Pinera would win, while only 31 percent said it would go for Frei. Polls have shown all year long that Chileans believe Pinera is most likely to be their next president, and many Frei supporters grudgingly acknowledge that this election may usher in the first conservative government in Chile since the 1989 transition to democracy. Press reports that the Concertacion is making contingency plans for a possible defeat add to the sense that the Concertacion era may be

ending.

Marco Enriquez -Ominami Supports "'the 29 Percent Candidate"

¶4. (U) After a month of rumors and endless speculation in the blogosphere, former independent progressive presidential candidate Marco Enriquez-Ominami, who came in third in December's first-round election with 20 percent, publicly backed Eduardo Frei on January 13. However, he did so in the weakest possible terms. Enriquez-Ominami did not even mention Frei by name and instead emphasized Frei's poor showing in the first round, saying "I will vote for the candidate who received 29 percent of the vote." At the same time, Enriquez-Ominami forcefully criticized the conservatives and their ties to the Pinochet-era, stating that "An abyss separates us from the candidacy of the right (Pinera). They filled our country with grief and were the accomplices of those who assassinated my father." (Note: Enriquez-Ominami's father Miguel Enriquez, who founded the Leftist Revolutionary Movement, MIR, was killed by dictatorship security forces in 1976. End note.)

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¶5. (U) While many prominent Enriquez-Ominami supporters have come out individually in favor of Frei -- including Enriquez-Ominami's adoptive father Senator Carlos Ominami -- others have endorsed Pinera. Enriquez-Ominami's own endorsement was strictly personal and an explicit vote against the right, rather than a vote for Frei. His message to those who voted for him in December was, "You are the only judges of your conscience and your vote."

¶6. (U) Political analysts argue that Enriquez-Ominami's begrudging endorsement is an attempt to shield him from being blamed for a Frei loss -- especially in the eyes of loyal Concertacion voters -- while situating him as the progressive opposition figure against a conservative Pinera government. This would place him in a position to run again for president in 2013. (Note: Pundits are already speculating that current President Michelle Bachelet, who is leaving office with approval ratings of a never-before-seen 81 percent, will be the center-left candidate in 2013. End note). Enriquez-Ominami also recently announced the founding of a new political party (Ref E), something that will require some time -- and citizen signatures -- to get off the ground.

Pinera Finalized an Error-Free Campaign, Frei's Still Lackluster

¶7. (SBU) Frei and Pinera finalized their campaigns on January 14, the final day to hold electoral activities before the January 17 presidential run-off election. Frei chose to hold his campaign closure in a poor neighborhood in the Santiago metropolitan region and appeal to traditional Concertacion voters. Pinera headed to the southern city of Concepcion in a last bid to pick up Enriquez-Ominami voters. (Note: Enriquez-Ominami's famous revolutionary father, Miguel Enriquez, was a native son of Concepcion. End note.) Most analysts characterize the Pinera campaign, including the candidate's performance in the last televised debate on January 11, as error-free. Frei's campaign needed to generate a new buzz during the run-up to the second round. Despite adding key up-and-coming younger politicians to his campaign front-line and performing reasonably well in the debate, his campaign is characterized as not able to produce the crucial "knock-out" performance.

Spoiled Ballots and Abstentions Could Be Key

18. (SBU) In December's first-round, 3.45 percent of voters either spoiled their ballot or left it blank. Nearly 13 percent of voters abstained, even though voting is mandatory. In the MORI poll released January 13, seven percent of voters said they planned to spoil their ballot. Low turnout and protest votes will help Pinera, who had a large head start after the first round and therefore needs to add far fewer additional votes to cross the 50 percent threshold. The sense of triumph exuded by the Pinera camp may also discourage anti-Pinera voters from turning out to vote. On the other hand, as political analysts point out, now that the vote is looking closer, many voters that expected to abstain or issue a protest vote -- or Concertacion supporters that assumed Pinera would win no matter what -- may show up and mark a preference because they would feel that their vote could really matter in such a close election. For this reason, President Bachelet explicitly endorsed Frei on January 14 and called for Chileans to not spoil their ballot or leave it blank.

Comment:

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19. (SBU) With the election just days away, the Pinera campaign is exuding confidence while the Frei campaign looks anxious. It is possible that Frei could win, but would be a big surprise for most election observers. Currently, speculation is less on who will win than Pinera's likely victory margin. Pinera campaign advisors predict he will gain a healthy margin of victory of at least three to four percentage points. A tight winning margin for Pinera, particularly if the number of spoiled ballots and abstentions is high, could be seen as reducing his mandate, but even so a center-right victory after 20 years of Concertacion presidencies would be a landmark event in Chile. End Comment.
SIMONS